

**Subject:** ProPublica press inquiry

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**From:** David McSwane

**To:** BLM\_Press@blm.gov, Mike Spies

Hello,

We are Mike Spies and David McSwane, reporters with ProPublica. We're working on a story about the BLM's realignment, and the story will highlight concerns among staff that the agency's might is being diminished by the move. The story will generally raise questions about the justifications for the overhaul, whether it will be cost effective and whether the move is part of an effort to influence federal employees to quit. It is built on internal agency records we've obtained, interviews with current BLM staff and recordings of staff meetings. Below are some finer points we'll include in the story and some questions we have. We welcome any comments you'd like to add. **Our deadline to add your comments is 12:30 p.m. Thursday.**

- An internal document we've reviewed, that was produced earlier this week, indicates that 11 staffers vacated their positions between July 16 and September 13 and includes the note: "We anticipate additional employees will depart."
  - How does this square with acting director Pendley's comments before the House Natural Resources Committee last week that he didn't want to lose a single employee?
  - Is this plan intended to decrease the BLM workforce?
- The latest accounting we've seen indicates that only 59 BLM officials will remain in Washington, 39 will be moved to Grand Junction. Another 214 are being transferred from Washington to locations throughout the West.
  - Are there any changes you'd like to note?
- Last week, Acting Director Pendley specifically told the House Committee on Natural Resources that FOIA officers and BLM officials who work directly with Congress would not be moving out of Washington. Here is the quote:

"I want to assure Congress that we will continue to do our core headquarters' functions, and by that I mean our Congressional affairs, our regulatory affairs, our public affairs, our budget function and our Freedom of Information Act requests."

"They're going to be in main Interior," he said, "a hallway away from the secretary of the Interior, the Department Secretary and other decision makers, and they'll be able to be responsive to the requests of Congress."

- But the internal documents we've reviewed contradict those statements. We reviewed hundreds of job descriptions and found the following, which will appear in the story:

Many of the jettisoned positions play key roles in assisting with Congressional oversight, civil rights issues, transparency and assessing potential environmental impacts. About seven positions in the bureau's equal employment opportunity division will be scattered into offices in Phoenix, Denver, or Grand Junction. Four legislative affairs specialists are being asked to move three time zones away, to Reno. Five people who process Freedom of Information Act requests, and an analyst who processes

external requests for data, are slated to be moved to one of a dozen Western cities. At least seven senior positions whose descriptions include “interfaces significantly with Capitol Hill” are being moved to four different western locales, records show.

- Did the acting director lie to Congress? How does this internal accounting square with the assurances made that FOIA staff and Congressional liaisons will not be impacted by this overhaul?

Staff has been repeatedly told that future funding for the realignment is assured, even though Congress only appropriated \$5.6 million dollars for the initial stage of the move. When an employee raised this concern in a July meeting, an assistant director said it was unknown if there was a contingency plan in place should future funding get blocked.

- Why is BLM staff being told that the bureau anticipates Congress will provide FY 2020 funds for the realignment?
- Is there a Plan B if Congress declines to provide additional funds for the realignment? If so, what is it?

BLM officials have repeatedly told staff and lawmakers that the Department conducted a cost-benefit analysis showing the realignment is cost beneficial. But the Department has also said, in writing, that the total cost of the move is unknown.

- How is it possible to conduct a proper cost-benefit analysis without knowing the total cost of the move?
- Why hasn't the cost-benefit analysis been made public?
- Why, after requesting a copy of the analysis via FOIA, was ProPublica's request placed on the “complex track”?

Documents show that BLM management has offered staff relocation incentives, including a one-time lump-sum payment equal to a quarter of an employee's salary in exchange for a two-year commitment to the job. In a letter, Pendley acknowledges that staff will be taking a pay cut. “Under this option,” he wrote to Secretary Bernhardt, “it is estimated that the cost could be as much as \$4,545,798.”

- Has staff been told that they will be taking a location-based pay cut if they move?
- How did Mr. Pendley arrive at the figure mentioned above? Does that figure only account for salaries and bonuses?
- When arguing for the reason why the request should be approved, Mr. Pendley wrote, “Maintains consistent messaging that the Department of the Interior wants to work with employees?” Why would BLM staff feel otherwise?

In staff meetings, employees have asked if the Department will also find jobs for the spouses of those moving out West. In one meeting, an official said, “That's a consideration we'll have to make through the process.”

- Will the Department be helping the spouses of BLM staff find jobs out West? And how?

According to a recent implementation plan, BLM employees have until July 1 to accept their

reassignment, or, unless an extension is granted, they will lose their jobs.

- Is this timing set in stone?

Please feel free to call or email if you have any questions. The story is set to publish tomorrow afternoon.

Thank you,

Mike and David

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